



# The Changing Workplace

March/2000

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## Flexible Working Arrangements

### INTRODUCTION

The nature of work is changing. Global competition, technological, economic and social change combine to influence changes in how, when and where we do our work.

In the past there was a strict division between the realms of work and family. Care for children; the elderly or sick was seen as a personal or family responsibility. Of course, that model was based on the assumption that there was one full-time wage earner and one full-time family care-giver in each household. Furthermore, these households were surrounded by like households that provided mutual and community-based support to one another.

Today however, a significant demographic reality for employers and workers is that these realms are no longer distinct. The profile of the typical two adult household is one where both adults work, at least part time, and are raising a family, many of whom are also caring for aging parents. Furthermore, there has been significant growth in the number of single-parent households, the majority of whom participate in the paid

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workforce. In any case, most households are coping with these competing demands without community supports. As a result, employees are looking for realistic options to better manage and coordinate the demands of work and family.



And, employers are faced with new challenges in attracting and retaining skilled personnel. In the past, employers could typically assume that individuals possessing the skill, talent and abilities needed to perform any particular job, were not in short supply. Today, however, employers are becoming increasingly aware of the need to provide value-added benefits to employees who possess the skills the organization needs, in order to retain them. It has been well documented that quality of work culture, as well as quality of working conditions, outweigh high wages as effective

retention tools. Smart employers are responding by finding out about the stressors employees experience in their work lives and identifying ways to address them. One of the more apparent trends in responding to employee needs is the adoption of flexible workplace practices.

As a matter of fact, flexible workplace practices are not entirely new. A few have been on the scene for as long as 20 years in some industries. Interestingly, the collective feedback strongly indicates that flexible practices provide significant benefits to the workplace, chief among them, happier employees and increased productivity.

Read on and get an overview of some of the flexible practices that employers currently use to respond to the changing nature of work and employment.

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## Flexible Work Hours

Flexible working hours can cover a range of employee and business needs. The range of flexible work options may be based on changes in the overall work design, including,

when the work is done, how jobs and tasks are organized, who performs the tasks, where the work is done and how the work is managed.

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## • **Flextime**

Flextime might include flexible starting and quitting times, accompanied by "core hours" when all employees are expected to be present. Alternatively, flextime might involve variations in the length of the workday, with staggered hours such as a six-hour day followed by a 10-hour day, which may or may not include core hours. With any flextime schedule, there is generally an agreement that a specified number of hours are worked by the end of a specified period. As well, flextime provisions typically require that appropriate communication and rescheduling is undertaken should an unplanned day off be required periodically and on the basis that time lost will be made up within predetermined limits.



Alternatively an employee could reduce their weekly hours anywhere from 10 per cent to 50 per cent, on an ongoing basis, with a pro-rated reduction in pay and benefits. In some industries or occupations flextime options can include 10 months work per year with pay spread over the full 12 months.

## • **Other Possibilities**

Other flextime arrangements might allow employees to access their sick leave credits as a means to deal with unexpected or urgent family needs. Access to vacation leave on the basis of one day or one week at a time, or all in one block, depending on employee need, also provides flexible time options to the workplace.

## • **Compressed Work-Week and Reduced Work-Week**

Additional flextime options can include the compressed work-week which allows the employee to concentrate full-time hours into 4 to 4.5 days per week. Another option involves working longer daily hours in exchange for one day off every week or two.

## **When are flexible work hours suitable?**

Flextime is an option that can allow the workplace to operate for longer hours, enabling a reduction in overtime and improving or extending office coverage. For the workplace that can't afford more expensive staff benefits, flextime provides a low-cost, morale boosting option to employees. Furthermore, it can reduce and/or eliminate tardiness

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while allowing employees to resolve scheduling conflicts or a last-minute crisis as they strive to balance their work – life demands. Flextime can also allow employment to be concentrated into fewer months per year without compromising organizational objectives and without losing valued employees. Those organizations or industries that do not or cannot incorporate numerical (number of staff on site) or operational flexibility are least likely to consider flextime options.

### **What are the typical benefits and drawbacks with flexible work hours?**

The old adage that a happy worker is a productive worker applies to the benefits of flextime. Allowing employees to schedule work according to their needs outside the workplace pays off in improved employee morale and job satisfaction. Flextime can result in difficulties (at least in the beginning) with employee communication, scheduling meetings and coordinating work due to differing schedules.



Another benefit can be the extension of the organizational workday without the added costs of overtime. However, a manager or supervisor who believes s/he has to personally oversee employees to ensure they are working productively, will have to extend their own hours of work in order to continue with this type of management. Such a response to flextime stems from a concern that it may be abused, however, employers typically find the problem of abuse is small<sup>1</sup>.

Most employers who report minor abuse of flextime don't perceive it as a major drawback. That's because typically management's focus shifts from watching the clock and line-of-sight supervision, to quality of outcomes or product.

The good news is that flextime has already been a workplace practice in numerous organizations for over 20 years and the combined feedback on flextime leaves little doubt that it is popular not only with employees but also with employers. Over time employers have reported that flexible work hour practices are a low cost benefit they can offer employees which brings significant returns to the organization including cross-training of employees, improved recruitment, improved retention and high payoff in employee morale and productivity.

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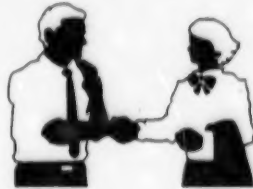
<sup>1</sup>Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre. *Changing Times, New Ways of Working: Alternative Working Arrangements and Changes in Working Time*. April 1997.

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## Flexible Positions

Increasingly employees are seeking workplace flexibility in order to put more time toward their family, their education or training and/or community commitments. Women are overwhelmingly participating in the paid workforce. Most working women typically take on the second shift of family care in their homes as well. As such, flexible paid positions can be an essential ingredient in balancing these multiple roles. For employers, flexible positions can facilitate both attracting and retaining employees with valuable skill sets.



- **Regular, Part-Time (Voluntary)**

This form of part-time work includes job security and all other rights and benefits available to an organization's regular full-time employees. Regular part-time might involve working a shortened day, five days a week or regular hours for fewer than five days weekly.

### **When are flexible positions most suitable?**

Like other flexible workplace practices, position flexibility permits an organization to retain valued employees. Some organizations see job-sharing in particular as an opportunity to increase the breadth of skills and experience in a single position. As well, these flexible options can be particularly useful in positions where continuity is necessary but turnover has been a problem. As such the possibilities for designing more flexible scheduling as a means to address coverage as well as continuity problems can be an attractive feature of flexible positions.

Employees who do best in these positions can generally be characterized as having excellent communication, organization and

- **Job-Sharing**

Job-sharing is typically a voluntary arrangement whereby two employees share full-time hours, responsibilities, accountability and pay of one full-time position, on a permanent, ongoing basis. Benefits such as vacation leave, sick leave, and so on, are shared on a pro-rata basis. Typically the job-share is split 50-50 but could be accomplished via 2.5 days/week each or alternating 2-day with a 3-day week, or working one week on and one week off. The job-share split could also be a 60-40 or an 80-20 split.



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interpersonal skills. Likewise, supervising and managing these positions requires excellent communication skills as well as an ability to trust that employees will perform and fulfill their responsibilities without close, direct supervision.

### **What are the typical benefits and drawbacks with flexible positions?**

One particular challenge with flexible positions involves including employees in these positions in daily activities. Communicating, training, meetings, and work timelines can become more difficult when employees are not working full-time. Typically, however, these challenges are readily resolved when tackled as they arise, and problem-solved with all parties involved.

Organizational benefits can be enhanced if there is agreement that



sharers will substitute for each other whenever possible. With job shares the organization can also benefit from the broader and deeper range of skills two employees bring to one position. As such, two heads can often be more productive than one. As a result however, having unrealistic expectations or assigning unreasonable workloads can result. To avoid or address this challenge it is important to continuously assess workload levels and benchmark against similar positions.

The increase in the working population heading for retirement and the valuable experience and skills they take with them can be a human resource challenge for many organizations.

However, job-sharing and/or regular part-time can be an opportunity to cross-train or link new employees with those preparing for retirement.

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## **Flexible Location**

Flexlocation, also referred to as telecommuting or telework, allows an employee to work offsite for either a portion of or the entire work week. Typically the employee works either from home or a satellite office location. A virtual office may be required for such arrangements. This typically includes appropriate

computer and software, voice mail, electronic mail and telephone. Flexlocation allows employees to reduce commute time and expense, and frees up those resources for the family. Likewise, for the employer, it can reduce office space expenses and result in higher productivity. Flexlocation arrangements can be

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made on a temporary basis or, as part or all, of a regular work schedule.

Typically flexlocation is a viable alternative where the job or tasks involved require a degree of autonomy. This criteria cuts across all occupational levels.

### **When is flexlocation suitable?**

Certainly where the cost of office space is high, having some employees work off-site can be an effective way to trim costs. Furthermore the advantages of flexlocation for the employee can make it a low-cost, but immensely attractive benefit that aids recruitment as well as retention. Finding job candidates can be a problem in some locations and options that allow employees to work from home, or a satellite office, can allow the employer to cast a wider net and recruit from an expanded and more distant labour pool. As well, flexlocation allows employers to accommodate or seek-out workers that otherwise would find on-site employment difficult or unnecessarily hindering. Such candidates might include employees with temporary or long-term disabilities who have the skills, talents and abilities the employer is seeking.

In some regions where there is either a dispersed population and/or limited job opportunities, the application of flexlocation employment may provide a means of economic development for the area.



### **What are the typical drawbacks and benefits of flexlocation?**

Employer concern about productivity is commonly associated with flexlocation arrangements. The collective wisdom on supervising off-site workers suggests that the primary criteria should be on quality of work and completion of projects. Both employees and employers report higher productivity with flexlocation arrangements. A Canadian national financial institution reports that evaluations of flexlocation programs reveal higher employee productivity. They note, "some employees who work off-site say that increased quiet time, the ability to focus on tasks without interruption, and the ability to work when they are more energetic and creative help them accomplish more."<sup>2</sup>

For employees, flexlocation has the advantage of less commuting time,

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<sup>2</sup>Canadian Work and Family Services. Royal Bank of Canada Work & Family Program Employee Manager Surveys. Toronto 1994.

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more control over their work environment and the opportunity to combine work and family responsibilities. These advantages often translate into reduced expenses associated with work such as clothing, food and transportation. As well, flexlocation could offer the advantage of reducing environmental damage and encouraging energy conservation.

On the other hand, flexlocation, particularly when it is the employee's home, can leave an employee feeling isolated. The solution may be increased time at the main office site or regular communication between locations. Working at home can make it



difficult to decide when to stop. As well, working off-site can disadvantage the employee in relation to advancement opportunities because they tend to be outside the informal communication networks important to job mobility.

Issues such as child care, elder care, workers' compensation, and occupational health and safety, as well as labour standards, should be addressed when implementing telecommuting options. Likewise, issues of software licensing and information security need to be considered. In unionized workplaces, consideration must also be given to implications for the collective agreement.

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## Alternative Flexible Work Arrangements

There are many more ways in which today's organizations are creating supportive and flexible work environments. Depending on the needs of the employer, the

employees and the nature of the work involved, an abundance of supportive/flexible practices can be tailored to your organization.

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